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01282223 99-31619

Demo proves it--workflow spec lets messages flow

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Machine Design v68n15 PP: 74-75 Aug 22, 1996 CODEN: MADEAP ISSN:
 0024-9114 JRNL CODE: MDS

DOC TYPE: Journal article LANGUAGE: English LENGTH: 2 Pages

WORD COUNT: 433

ABSTRACT: A public demonstration of a new *Workflow* *Interoperability* Specification devised by an organization called the Workflow Management Coalition has shown that the road has been cleared for software from different vendors to communicate about the status and flow of projects.

TEXT: The road has been cleared for software from different vendors to communicate about the status and flow of projects, their "workflow."

That is one of the conclusions to come out of a public demonstration of a new *Workflow* *Interoperability* Specification devised by an organization called the Workflow Management Coalition. The demonstration, which took place at the recent Workflow Canada Conference in Toronto, involved workflow software from IBM, Digital, Microsoft, Staffware, and Wang. Packages from these vendors all exchanged information as part of three supply chain management scenarios.

The demonstrations involved sending information back and forth as it might flow between entities such as retailers, distributors, and manufacturers. The simulated tasks that took place included such actions as checking order status, receiving notification of completed actions, updating inventory information, and other bookkeeping associated with projects, goods, or services that span between more than one company or department.

The significance of the demonstration goes beyond simple order processing, say organizers. "Though the demo was in supply chain management, it was just an example. Multiple companies or departments that are autonomous but need to cooperate are the ideal candidates for applying this spec," says Sunil Sarin, chairman of the Coalition's Interoperability Workgroup and workflow product architect with InConcert, a Xerox new enterprise company. "At the level the spec deals with, the participating software needn't be a workflow engine. MRP or PDM software having workflow functions can use it to exchange messages."

The term "workflow software" refers to packages that basically keep track of projects or act as coordinators of events moving through different stages of completion. Such packages generally track such factors as project status, delay times, commitments made by participants, waiting times, and similar issues.

Though there can be overlap between workflow packages and other software disciplines such as electronic data interchange (EDI), the new workflow specification goes deeper than these earlier standards. "EDI focuses on what is going on in individual messages. There is no notion of a process that spans multiple messages," says Sarin. "The interoperability spec adds the concept that messages are part of a workflow process."

The new specification is designed so that interoperability functions easily add to existing software without modifying core functions. "The challenge was defining the scope of the specification clearly and narrowly enough so there wouldn't be technical barriers preventing different packages from cooperating," says Sarin. "The requesting software needs no knowledge of

how the message recipient implements a request. Software only needs to know the name of the process and its inputs and outputs. There is no need for it to understand anything else across systems."

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GEOGRAPHIC NAMES: US

DESCRIPTORS: Information systems; Management controls; Workflow software;
Applications; Advantages; Many companies

CLASSIFICATION CODES: 9000 (CN=Short Article); 9190 (CN=United States);
5240 (CN=Software & systems)

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